

TURNING WRITING INTO A PERSON: A NEW APPROACH TO TEACHING AND THINKING ABOUT WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This procedural article offers a new framework for thinking about and teaching writing in intensive English programs and ESL for-credit courses in higher education. The central concept is to teach writing as a person versus the standard way of presenting writing as a language skill. In short, writing is personified and becomes the students' intimate confidant. I start by surveying the inspiration behind the project, which is based on two significant factors (i.e., the use of personification and emotions) discussed in cognitive psychology, educational psychology, and neuroscience. I then explain the new approach and show how I implement it in my intermediate, high intermediate, and advanced writing courses. I conclude with a discussion of three benefits that English language learners acquire from using the method.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a craft that takes considerable time to develop in one's native language. It demands clarity and rigor in thought and an understanding of various techniques that help express the writer's feelings, insights, and ideas. The challenges with writing become even more pronounced if we attempt to do it in a second or third language. For many English language teachers and their English language learners (ELLs), writing is

often one of the most difficult language skills they will encounter. Unfortunately, there is no one particular method that can neatly solve all the issues involved in teaching and learning how to write.

I have, however, developed an approach that not only lessens the stress that often comes with writing but also helps ELLs write better, write with a genuine reader in mind, and write effectively about writing and the writing process. How is this accomplished? The answer lies in the perspective I use to inspire the art of writing. That is, I do not teach writing as a “skill” or acquiring a “skill,” but as meeting a “new friend” or “mentor.” I ask the students to personify writing and turn it into a friend who will help them write and develop a metacognitive awareness of the writing process.

To help writing instructors enliven their classes and enhance the way writing is taught, I will first discuss two significant features that inspired the idea and then briefly explain how the activity evolved. I will next explain the procedure I use to introduce the concept to my ELLs, and how I implement it in my classes. I will conclude with the benefits of this approach.

THE INSPIRATION AND EVOLUTION OF THE PROJECT

Years ago I became interested in synesthesia and how its underlying dynamics and principles could help my ELLs acquire vocabulary. Synesthesia is a relatively common brain condition in which one or more senses are switched or crossed so that a synesthete might, for example, smell colors, hear tastes, see smells, or feel sounds. There are currently 80 known kinds of synesthesia. One kind of synesthesia that I was particularly interested in is the personification and genderfication of numbers and letters.

In Cytowic and Eagleman's (2011) research on synesthesia, they discuss a woman who experiences the number 1 as "[w]hite; male; quiet character; youthful appearance but serious in character," and she describes the number 2 as "[g]reen with an almost bluish tinge; masculine; good-looking, somewhat outgoing, laughs easily, kind" (p. 42). In reviewing the above and other similar case studies, I felt the associations developed in personification and genderfication synesthesia could be used to teach vocabulary (see Randolph, 2016) and writing (see Randolph, 2017). I also believed that personifying writing could make the skill or image of the skill less abstract and more concrete. This notion of being concrete or tangible would, I hoped, usher forth the crucial and useful element of emotions. If my ELLs could connect with writing on an emotional level by personifying it, I was confident I could help them become more engaged in both practicing the craft of writing and developing an interest in the process.

Cognitive psychology (Salovey & Meyer, 1990), educational psychology (Jensen, 2008), and neuroscience (Medina, 2014; Ratey, 2002; Willis, 2006) continually demonstrate the significance of using emotions and eliciting the connections tied to emotions as vital tools in academic instruction. The more that emotions can be used in teaching, the more the students learn and enjoy learning. There is no secret reason why emotions are so important. Emotions are connected to memories and experiences and vice versa. All three—memories, experiences, and emotions—form a powerful bond between the subjects and the learning process. If teachers want their students to learn and become engaged in the material, then they merely need to include emotions. In 2013, I conducted a survey on emotions and learning ($N=42$). It was no surprise that all 42

respondents said that they needed some emotional element for them to learn. If there was no emotion connected to the content, then they simply did not learn it (Randolph, 2013).

Therefore, to bring the stress-lowering personification component and emotional element into my intermediate to advanced university ESL writing classes, I used to start each semester by telling my students to think about writing not as a language skill, but rather as a human being with whom they could have contact and develop a friendship. I would ask my students to learn to walk hand-in-hand with “Writing.” They could imagine Writing as a man or a woman. The important point was to think about writing as a friend or confidant, someone to share inner thoughts and ideas with inside and outside of the classroom.

This concept was a good start, and my students liked it; however, they would soon forget about the idea as the semester progressed. I felt that I needed to revise it, elaborate on it, and turn the concept into a semester-long activity if I really wanted my students to benefit from it. After reflecting on this limited attempt to personify writing, I developed the current, semester-long project. This approach is used for intermediate to high intermediate ESL for-credit classes where the writing focus is on paragraph structures and for advanced ESL for-credit classes that focus on compositions, essays, and analytical summaries.

PERSONIFYING WRITING – THE NEW APPROACH

To introduce this personified concept of Writing, I have found it best to create an intense, drama-like atmosphere in the classroom (Randolph, 2019). The instructor’s presentation must be genuine, emotional, and elicit interest among the students. A key

component I have discovered is that if I describe the setup of my students' meeting with Writing with enthusiasm and in great detail, then they reciprocate and respond by thinking and writing with equal enthusiasm and detail. Once the tone has been established, I proceed in the following way.

The Setup

First, I have my students relax their bodies and their minds, focus for a moment on their breathing, and then imagine Writing as a real person. I tell them that writing as they know it is no longer a craft but a person. I then suggest that Writing can be a man or a woman; it is up to the preference of each student. If the students have difficulty creating an image, I encourage them to think about a friend, family member, teacher, or coach who they love and trust. This will help them start to imagine Writing on an immediate personal level.

Next, with the fresh, new images in their minds, I ask the students to visualize the following sequence of events. First, I tell my students that someone very important wants to meet them. He or she cannot wait another minute, and that someone is Writing. Furthermore, Writing is walking energetically down the hall and will be outside the door at any moment. Writing is knocking on the door, asking to come in. He or she is opening the door, walking in, and sitting down next to them with a vibrant smile.

The Writing Response

I ask the students to continue imagining the physical appearance of Writing. After giving them a few minutes to imagine what he or she looks like, I have them jot down detailed notes about the newly created muse. Then I have them share their creations and

insights with a partner. This helps them further develop their ideas and possibly use the comments from their partners. Once they have thought about, written, and discussed the physical characteristics, I have my students go through the same process for Writing's personality traits.

As a homework assignment, the students write a short, three-paragraph narrative character sketch. The first paragraph is a narrative about the excitement and intrigue they experienced when meeting Writing; the second paragraph details Writing's physical characteristics; and the final paragraph addresses the personality traits and offers a short conclusion. I ask the students to record these feelings and ideas as their first entry in their "Dialogue with Writing Journal." The purpose of this first writing assignment is to harness the new excitement that the students feel for their muse and also, as above, to help make writing and the writing process more personal, tangible, and interesting. The narrative-character sketch can be peer reviewed so that the students can see what their classmates have come up with. This, however, depends on how much time an instructor wants to spend on this part of the activity. I have done peer reviews in the lower levels and in the upper levels. In both cases, students benefited from peer comments and were able to improve their narratives regarding clarity and detail.

DIALOGUE WITH WRITING JOURNAL

This is a journal that encourages and promotes a deeper understanding and semester-long relationship with Writing. The first entry is the narrative-character sketch of Mr./Mrs./Ms. Writing. Then, in the weeks that follow, the students are required to think about one or two questions they address to Mr./Mrs./Ms. Writing about the craft of

writing. I encourage them to focus on techniques or skills that they are struggling with as writers. These questions may include specific issues with academic writing; how to develop writing techniques; or how to incorporate sources in their writing. Examples of some former student questions to their Writing muse are listed below.

- Dear Mr. Writing,
How can I paraphrase academic texts effectively?
- Dear Mrs. Writing,
How much detail is sufficient for my reader?
- Dear Ms. Writing,
What is the best way to develop a dialogue between my sources and my original ideas? (Randolph, 2019).

Based, then, on the physical descriptions (e.g., “Ms. Writing’s stern stare causes me to focus”) and personality traits (e.g., “Ms. Writing encourages me to take risks”) that the students create when they write about their Writing muse, they will then reflect on these questions and attempt to answer them from the perspective of Mr./Mrs./Ms. Writing.

Next, we have class discussions about the questions to address the students’ concerns or interests. I also require that the students discuss the questions in the study groups that we design for the purpose of answering these questions. As the students discuss these challenges, I ask them to keep the image and personality of their muse in mind and answer the questions or solve the problems as they think their muse would answer or solve them. This helps the students keep their muse fresh in mind throughout the term, and it helps them develop their muse as part of their “writer’s psyche” and enhance their metacognitive awareness of writing and the writing process.

After class discussions and small group dialogues, I gather their questions in a list and ask each student to choose two that interest them the most. They may choose their own questions or questions from a classmate. From my recent experience, most students preferred to choose questions from their classmates over their own questions. The students answer these questions based on their writing experiences in my class and from the perspective of their muse, Writing.

Each response is a two-paragraph answer. The first paragraph addresses the question and tries to answer the main concern. The second paragraph is a detailed example about how to solve the question or concern. That is, with their unique muse in mind (inspired by writing the first three-paragraph assignment), the students answer the questions with as much detail and personal knowledge as possible. If the question is, “How much detail is sufficient for my reader?”, the student answers the question from what he/she has learned so far in the course and also from the perspective of their muse. Then the students provide a suitable example of writing with sufficient details. These examples can be written as process or descriptive paragraphs. The key factor, however, is that they must be clear and accessible in terms of future application by both themselves and their peers.

The next stage is a peer review of the responses to the questions. I pair students up and have them take a partner’s work home to be reviewed. I ask that the reviewer focus mainly on clarity of thought in the answer and make sure that the example about how to solve the issue is coherent and gives sufficient details so that a student could actually use it to help them to become a better writer. After the peer review activity, the

students revise their work and submit it for a grade. The question and response activity is usually done twice during a semester. This could, however, be done more frequently, depending on how much time an instructor wants to devote to this project.

THE BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT

I have found that the benefits of this project vary depending on which level of writing course I teach. There are, however, three consistent benefits that are apparent at all levels (Randolph, 2019). First, as the students literally create Writing from their own imagination and often transfer many of their own personality traits to Writing, the craft itself takes on a whole new meaning and they experience the skill of writing anew. Because it is personalized and personified, Writing becomes their friend, and the students also develop more trust and confidence in themselves, due, I think, to this concrete and tangible friendship.

Second, because Writing follows the students throughout the course, this muse naturally becomes each student's audience or reader. The idea of an audience is ubiquitous in writing textbooks, and yet it is a hard concept to grasp because it is often too abstract for many students. However, a self-created personal reader is more concrete and approachable. Students have even told me that their "writing muse" follows them into their other classes and acts as "that voice in their writer's mind."

Third, once all the questions about writing have been answered, peer reviewed, and revised, I gather the questions and responses into a student-created *writer's guidebook*. I make copies of these guidebooks and give them to the students. They can

continue to use this book in their future classes at the university to help them write and reflect on the writing process.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

At the outset of this article, I addressed the possible challenges that writing presents to the native user of English as well as to an ELL. This reality, however, can be transformed from a daunting one to a very refreshing and intrinsically joyful one. By personifying the craft of writing, students can learn to take a seemingly abstract and complex skill and turn it into a concrete and intimate part of their personhood. In the process, not only do they become more comfortable with writing, but they also develop a mindful understanding of the process, and even learn to think and write metacognitively about writing and what it means to them as unique learners and creators of ideas.

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